

Tens of thousands march in Montreal to support student strike, condemn ‘neo-liberalism’

Quebec Court of Appeal turns down another request to suspend Law 78

Sunday 29 July 2012, by [ANNIS Roger](#) (Date first published: 23 July 2012).

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The monthly march in support of the student strike in Quebec scored another impressive outcome yesterday. The CLASSE student association that took the lead in organizing the action says 80,000 people marched.*

Actions were also held in Quebec City and Trois Rivières. Newspaper reports say that 1,000 marched in the former, one hundred in the latter. (Trois Rivières is the fourth largest city in Quebec, located halfway between Montreal and Quebec City on the St. Lawrence River.)

Students have been marching on the 22nd of each month since March, reaching a high point in participation of 400,000 people in May. The theme of this month's march was broader than past months, condemning not only a proposed post-secondary tuition fee hike and the draconian Law 78 that aims to break student associations but also regressive cuts to Quebec's public health care program and policies promoting ever more exploitation of the province's vast natural resources and resulting destruction to the natural environment.

One of the lead banners of the Montreal march read, 'Dehors les néo-libéraux' (Out with the neo-liberals). It was a play on the call for a provincial election that the governing Liberal Party is likely to call for September 4.

Another banner played with the theme of the province of Quebec, which is 'Je me souviens' (My heart is in Quebec). Alongside a large Quebec flag, the banner read, 'Je me soulève' (I am rising up).

All of Quebec's four post-secondary student associations took part in the day of action. As at the June march, student leaders cautioned journalists and other observers to not misread the tens of thousands at the June and July marches as symptomatic of a decline in the strike and student movement, compared to the hundreds of thousands who turned out in March, April, May. The leaders say the numbers will grow again when school resumes.

A majority of post-secondary students in Quebec went on strike in February and March of this year to block the imposition of a proposed tuition fee hike by the Quebec of approximately 75 per cent over the next seven years. About 160,000 students were on general strike when the government suspended the school year in May at strike-bound institutions.

The school year is supposed to resume on August 17, but the four student associations in the province vow the strike will continue. CLASSE, at least, says it will return to picketing, in defiance of Law 78.

The Montreal march featured several large contingents of trade union members and supporters. Many grouped behind the large banner of '*Profs contre la hausse*' (Professors against the tuition fee hike). Radio Canada (French language CBC Radio) reported contingents of unionists from the neighbouring province of Ontario.

Students are keen to receive support for their tuition fee struggle from workers and trade unions. Many also consider the fight against tuition hikes as part of a broader struggle of the working class against the pro-capitalist ('neo-liberal') policies of the Liberal government of Premier Jean Charest. The CLASSE association [1] wants unions to join in a campaign of broad struggle for social justice that it calls a 'social strike.'

Top union leaders in Quebec, however, have rejected such a course. They urge obedience to Law 78, saying they fear the financial consequences for their organizations if they were to be targeted by the government under the law.

Meanwhile, the Quebec Court of Appeal today rejected the appeal of a June 27 Superior Court decision that had turned down an application by student, trade union and civil rights organizations and individuals to suspend the application of Law 78 until the Quebec Superior Court rules on a challenge to the law by the same groups. The challenge will likely take one year or longer.

The request to suspend the application of Law 78 took aim in particular at Articles 16 to 21 that oblige the organizers of any political/social event or public expression of more than 50 people to seek prior police approval and that impose severe penalties on individuals and organizations that disobey.

Student leaders expressed disappointment at the court decision. It followed a ruling last week by Quebec's Human Rights Commission that the law is in violation of fundamental constitutional and civil rights [2].

But the leaders say the ruling changes nothing in their ongoing challenge to the Law and to the government's proposed tuition increases. To date, police and the government have declined to lay a single criminal charge under Law 78, indicating their concern that the law will be ruled unconstitutional by the courts. The more-than 3,000 arrests by police since the beginning of the student strike have been conducted under municipal or highway traffic regulations.

Several major newspapers in English speaking Canada printed front page photos and stories of the July 22 protest in Montreal, including the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*. This contrasted with non-reporting in print and broadcast by mainstream press in English Canada of the June 22 protest. But CBC Radio News stuck to its guns and did not report on the protest. It printed a perfunctory report on its website.

Roger Annis, July 23, 2012

* Police and newspaper reports gave figures for the Montreal march of 10,000 to 15,000.

Two news articles appended.

Quebec protesters weigh voters' wrath

Back on the streets after break, activists debate how hard to push without helping Charest's campaign

By Les Perraux, *Globe and Mail* (page one), July 23, 2012

Thousands of Quebecers marched in the streets for the first time in weeks on Sunday, reviving a vacationing protest movement that faces difficult tactical choices in a looming provincial election campaign.

Even as they banged drums and sang songs along downtown streets, students and their supporters were weighing options: Do they resume the intense protest tactics of the spring and risk pushing fence-sitting Quebecers into voting for the incumbent Premier, Jean Charest?

"It's a classic double-edged sword. I think it's going to get rough, and if it does, people who have not decided could turn against us," said Michel Thériault, a student of administration at the Université du Québec à Montreal. "On the other hand, people are mobilized and fed up with Jean Charest, and you don't want to lose that advantage."

The protests went quiet in July as students and activists headed off to summer jobs and vacation, but organizers are sticking to the 22nd of every month for a major protest. The police helicopter that hovered over Montreal nightly in the spring was grounded for weeks until Sunday. Even the peaceful clanging of pots of pans has faded into a sporadic vestige.

The loss of momentum was inevitable as campuses went dormant, student leaders say. They are also recalibrating their approach for an election campaign widely expected to be called next week.

Student groups plan peaceful rallies and a tour of the province, but they say they do not intend to dog Mr. Charest at campaign events. Others might. Protesters have proven difficult to control in the past.

The forthcoming election will be decided on razor-thin margins, and the last thing student leaders want is to drive swing voters who favour a tuition hike and law-and-order into the Liberal camp.

"There's that, and we also want to be independent of political parties. We won't be following any party, we won't be endorsing any party, we won't be disrupting any Liberal events. We will do our own tour to make sure our views are known," said Gabriel Nadeau Dubois, who represents CLASSE, the largest and most militant of the three main student groups.

In the spring, polls showed the majority of Quebecers supported a tuition hike and they gave Mr. Charest a gentle nudge upward in a tight race with the Parti Québécois, which came out firmly in favour of protesters.

The possibility Mr. Charest might win again was not lost on the street Sunday, where students like 18-year-old Jasmine Latendresse rattled off the many ways votes could split with two big parties and two smaller left-wing parties presenting alternatives to the Liberals.

They also expressed anxiety about what could happen next. "Civil war?" said Ms. Latendresse, a college student, punctuating her words with a nervous laugh. "Really though, what a total, lamentable failure it would be for us," added her friend, Mr. Thériault, 24.

Preparations for a summer election campaign have ramped up among all of Quebec's main parties.

Candidates and organizers have raced to rent office space, print publicity material and sign up for social media like Twitter.

They've also been forced to deal with their first eruptions of controversy. François Legault, leader of the Coalition avenir Québec, dumped candidate Kamal G. Lutfi after he went on a tweet-rant accusing Quebec separatists of being racist.

Mr. Lutfi complained he had been the object of "hatred" from sovereigntists because of his ethnic origin, which he did not specify. (Mr. Lutfi could not be reached Sunday.)

Students renew protest campaign. Show of strength ahead of possible election

By Benjamin Shingler (Canadian Press), *Toronto Star* (page one), July 23, 2012

MONTREAL— Thousands of students and their supporters took to the streets of Montreal on Sunday to denounce the province's tuition increases, sending a message they will be ready for a fight if Premier Jean Charest decides to call an election.

Protests against Quebec's Liberal government have eased during the summer months, but students said a strong turnout during the height of the summer holidays is proof the movement hasn't died out. "We want to make sure the momentum is still there," Gabriel Nadeau-dubois, a spokesman for the powerful CLASSE student group, told reporters. "We shouldn't think because there are fewer people here that the movement is over."

It has been widely speculated that on Aug. 1 premier Jean Charest may call an election set for early September.

CLASSE has promised it won't support one particular party; rather, it will work to make sure the Liberals don't return to power. Other student groups are also planning an information campaign explaining their opposition to the tuition increases.

"We want to make sure everybody understands what we did during the spring time, what we continue to do, and why we are doing it," said Yannick Gregoire, vice-president of an association of junior college students.

"We also want to make sure everybody knows what the Liberals did during their mandate."

Michel Leblanc, 72, who has been taking part in the protests for nearly five months, said he's hopeful the movement will have an impact at the ballot box.

"We all need to vote," said Leblanc. "Sometimes students don't vote, and if they do it will help get out Charest."

While some student leaders said tuition hikes remain the main point of disagreement, the movement has taken on a wide range of issues including the government's environmental and economic policies.

Many remain upset about Bill 78, the provincial law introduced in May that put limits on some

protests. The province's human rights commission released a report last week saying portions of the law infringe on fundamental rights and violate the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The theme of the march, according to CLASSE was the government's destructive "neo-liberal agenda."

One thing everyone in the crowd agreed on was that it's time for Charest to leave office. Polls, however, suggest a tight race between the Liberals and the Parti Québécois, with the new Coalition for Quebec's Future (CAQ) also garnering considerable support.

Eliane Laberge, the head of another student group (FECQ), said getting out the vote will be a priority if an election is called. Voter turnout among Quebecers between 18 and 25 was below 50 per cent in the last election in 2008. "We want a party that is representing the youth of Quebec," she said. "And we thought if the majority of them go vote, then maybe we can (make) a big difference."

There were also protest marches held Sunday in Quebec City and Trois-Rivières. Students have been holding major marches on the 22nd of every month since March.

P.S.

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<http://www.rogerannis.com/tens-of-thousands-march-in-montreal-to-support-student-strike-condemn-neo-liberalism/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.stopthehike.ca/>

[2] <http://www.rogerannis.com/quebec-human-rights-commission-slams-law-78-legal-challenge-proceeds/>